

IN BRIEF

WHY THE NEOTROPICAL GUANS WERE NAMED *PENELOPE*

Generic names of Neotropical Cracidae refer to early Spanish or South American Indian designations or to notable anatomical details, habitat, habits and vocalisations of the different species. An exception is the name *Penelope*, present in the ornithological literature since the earliest times (*apud* Aldrovandi 1636), the origin of which remains obscure, as apparently there is no reason for bestowing the name of a Greek princess, daughter of Icarius with the nymph Peribea and wife of Ulysses, King of Ithaca, on the Neotropical guans (Jobling 1991). Although the Penelope myth is connected with birds, the available references always involve ducks or geese (Anatidae), which bear no relation or similarity to New World Cracidae. To give an example, Pausanias, Apollodorus and Tzetes establish that Icarius' daughter, originally known as Arnea (ewe) or Arnacia (the flabby skin of an ewe), was re-named Penelope after being rescued from the sea by a flock of "streaked ducks" (penelops in Greek; see also Carnoy 1976), while the Odyssey mentions that Penelope was cheered in Ulysses' absence by the sight of her flock of twenty geese which she kept in the house. However, the legend also includes some very little known and even unusual aspects which seem to justify the peculiar choice of this name for a bird such as a guan.

Contrary to the Homeric Odyssey, Penelope was considered not a symbol of fidelity but a lascivious adultress by some classical authors. According to these sources, she gave birth to the Arcadian god Pan after maintaining promiscuous relations with all the local nobles who wanted her to remarry during Ulysses' absence. On the other hand, another legend states that Icarius' daughter covered her face with a veil to demonstrate the decision to follow Ulysses to Ithaca after his marriage (Kury 1992), a detail which could explain that one of the possible translations of Penelope is "with a spider-net over the face" (Graves 1985). Thus, it is not surprising to learn that the maenads, a group of orgiastic priestesses who followed Pan and Dionysus, were sometimes figured with their arms and face adorned with a reticular painting. This close relation with Pan and some other contradictions suggest that the Odyssean Penelope and the cult of a local nymph of the same name were merged in a single tale by various authors such as Ovid, Herodotus and Plutarch.

The image of a woman adorned with a contrasting reticular painting may easily be associated with Neotropical guans, as these Cracids have the feathers of foreneck and breast bordered with whitish giving a scaled appearance. In several species, e.g. the Dusky-legged Guan *Penelope obscura* Temminck, 1815 and the Rusty-margined Guan *Penelope superciliaris* Temminck, 1815, these marks are very conspicuous, and the birds seem to be covered by a netlike veil of whitish stripes. This kind of pattern might well suggest a mythological figure whose name is related to a reticulate woof, as may also be observed in some pictures of the maenads.

References:

- Aldrovandi, U. 1636. *Ornithologiae hoc est de Avibus historiae libri*. Vol. 3 Bologna.
Carnoy, A. 1976. *Dictionnaire étymologique de la Mythologie Gréco-Romaine*. Edit. Universitas, Louvain.
Graves, R. 1985. *Los mitos griegos*. Alianza Editorial, Madrid.
Jobling, J. A. 1991. *A Dictionary of Scientific Bird Names*. Oxford Univ. Press.
Kury, M. da G. 1992. *Dicionário de mitologia grega e romana*. Jorge Zahar Editor, Rio de Janeiro.

Seção de Ornitologia, Museu Nacional,
Quinta da Boa Vista,
Rio de Janeiro (RJ),
20940-040 Brazil.

DANTE MARTINS TEIXEIRA

21 April 1995

A FIFTH SPECIMEN OF THE TAHITI PARAKEET

The Tahiti Parakeet *Cyanoramphus zealandicus* (Latham, 1790) was a small, drab parrot which was probably endemic in Tahiti. It seemed never to have been numerous, and disappeared by the middle of the nineteenth century. Only four specimens of it were known until now, three in Britain and one in France. Two of the British specimens, one of which is the presumed type, are in the Merseyside County Museum, and the third in the Natural History Museum (Tring); all of them were brought back by the naturalists who accompanied Captain Cook, in the eighteenth century. The French specimen is kept in the Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle (Paris). It is one of three specimens collected in 1844 by Lieutenant J. de Marolles, and nothing is known of what happened to the two others (Greenway 1958, Jouanin 1962, Fuller 1987, Forshaw 1989, Knox & Walters 1994).

The specimen discovered by one of us (D.M.) in the collections of the Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle de Perpignan (France) (Voisin *et al.* 1995) has certainly nothing to do with de Marolle's birds, as it was collected two years earlier by G. Amadis, who, as a member of the expedition of the French Frigate "la Vénus", under the command of Admiral A. A. Dupetit-Thouars, stayed in Tahiti in 1842. This fifth specimen is in very good condition with its colours still fresh; its rather worn rectrices suggest that it was kept in a cage for some time. Its measurements are: culmen 19.5 mm, tarsus 22.5 mm, wing *c.* 140 mm (approximate measurement in order not to damage the specimen). There is no indication of locality or date on the stand, but from the Catalogues we know that this specimen entered the Muséum in 1845, probably in late September or early October.

We are glad to thank here the Association des Amis du Muséum, who kindly funded the visit of C. and J.-F. Voisin to Perpignan, as well as Prof. R. Bourgat, Curator of the Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle of that town, and his staff for their warm reception and facilities to work.

References:

- Forshaw, J. M. 1989. *Parrots of the World*. 3rd edn. Willoughby, Lansdowne.
Fuller, E. 1987. *Extinct birds*. Viking/Rainbird.